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Seeing God's Glory Through Dirty Water

THOMAS ROBINSON

John brings us as readers to a turning point in the Gospel at chapter 13. Through the first 12 chapters—often designated with the rubric “Gospel of Signs”—John has led us on a carefully focused journey to confront the reality of Jesus’ identity and its meaning. He has brought us face to face with the one who is God and also “with God,” who is Logos become flesh, who in John’s first chapter is confessed as “Lamb of God,” “Messiah,” “Son of God,” and “King of Israel” among other things. From the beginning John anticipates the outcome of this journey of revelation from his own experience of Jesus: “We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1.14). Along the way John gives us a privileged view of events as Jesus attracted disciples, dealt with controversies, performed signs, had dramatic encounters with various individuals, revealed himself through enigmatic and challenging discourses, and even raised the dead. Through Jesus’ encounters, John dramatizes the difficulties of genuine faith, of moving from ready words of confession and delight in signs to really encountering the God of all creation in the flesh, in Jesus, and then beginning to live in a world in which Jesus’ presence remakes all values. Like the parables in the other Gospels, John’s narratives often have an enigmatic and ironic quality that challenges us as readers to reflect more deeply and to allow Jesus to remake us from the inside out. John is not at all interested in simply giving us information about a man who is dead and gone. He wants us to encounter the living Jesus who gives life now and who still challenges us to see our world new.

The journey of the Gospel of Signs (John 1-12) led in crescendo to the revelation of Jesus as “the resurrection and the life” (11.25), to the seventh sign of giving life to dead Lazarus, and ironically to a warrant of death for the Jesus who is life (11.53). When we arrive at the 13th chapter, we are only a little over half way through the Gospel but have come to the last day of Jesus’ life. It begins with an evening meal with his disciples, who are the remnant of “the world” that God loved in giving his only son (3.16). They are “his own in the world” (13.1). Because the disciples are the ones whom Jesus will send out to carry on his mission empowered by the Holy Spirit (20.21-22), it is quite natural that Jesus’ last evening with the disciples should be focused on preparing them for their responsibilities. As always, however, we the readers are the true focus of the narrative. John guides us as we watch and hear Jesus and see how the disciples react and interact with him. John lets us inside Jesus’ thoughts so that we can better understand the difficulties of faith that the disciples manifest. We are able to see more, understand more, to be caught by Jesus’ vision of reality and to be drawn toward the faith and life in him that are the aim of the Gospel (20.31).



If we imagine the events of that last evening from the point of view of one of the disciples reclining at the meal with Jesus, as John describes it, the sense of puzzlement is not hard to grasp. The preceding events suggest an atmosphere of excitement and danger as throngs gathered in Jerusalem for the great feast of Passover. The general conversation around the table would have been interrupted only when they noticed that Jesus without a single word of explanation had gotten up, taken off his garment, tied a towel around his waist, poured water in a basin and begun to approach them one by one from behind to wash their feet. They had been with Jesus enough to know that such an action was sure to carry important meaning. But what meaning? Like the parables, this action came first to them as an image before their eyes, stirring their imaginations to interpretation, to wonder, to puzzlement.

As readers of the Gospel, however, we are privileged to have John as our guide. John takes great care to set the stage for what Jesus was to do and say. By taking us inside Jesus' thoughts, and allowing us to see this moment and setting as Jesus did, we are drawn into a framework of reality very different from what the disciples sensed.

1. Jesus knew the significance of the moment as none of the disciples could. This was the day he would die. But rather than death as an ending, he knew the hour had arrived to pass from this world to the Father. This was to be the climax and transformation of all that his life had been about and it would even redefine the significance of the events that had come before it. Thus Jesus calls the disciples to patience, "not now ... but later" (13.7, 36).
2. Jesus loves his disciples—"his own in the world"—and loved them "to the end." The latter phrase (*eis telos*) apparently combines the senses that he loved them to the highest or uttermost degree and that he loved them to the last moment, to the "It is finished" on the cross. By emphasizing Jesus' love, John urges us to interpret Jesus' actions that follow as expressions of this powerful love.
3. Mention of the Accuser's decision to incite Judas to betrayal adds another layer to reality. John wants us to see the events that follow in the context of cosmic and supernatural conflict between good and evil. He also emphatically reminds us that the betrayer, well known to Jesus, was among the disciples whose feet Jesus washed.
4. Jesus knew that the Father had given him universal power. John describes this awareness in simple terms that stand in stark contrast to the apparent reality of Jesus' life, without power or property, besieged by authorities, and within hours of a humiliating execution. Jesus, however, knew what was real. All the structures of power that seemed to make him vulnerable to religious and state authorities were a deception and delusion. As he reclined at the table surrounded by his circle of followers, everything was in his hands.
5. John ends his description with Jesus' knowledge that his earthly existence was entirely circumscribed by God—he came from God and was going to God. God was his true identity, manifested in flesh for the limited time of his earthly life.

By focusing on the reality that Jesus knew, John helps us readers to experience the startling surprise of Jesus' action. If you know that these are your last hours with your disciples, that your existence is suffused with divine glory, and that God has given everything into your hands, what do you do? How do you manifest that divine power? For Jesus the answer came in two parts: The first when he laid down his garments and knelt at the feet of his followers to wash their dirt into his basin; the second when he laid down his life by being lifted up on the cross, completing the work of the Father's will and the total outpouring of his love.

By verses 4 and 5 we readers are already caught. If we are honest, we know that if we were in Jesus' place, we would never ever have thought to show our greatness and power by stripping off the dignity of our clothing and going in silent service about the menial but somehow intimate task of scrubbing the calloused

feet of people who were in every way our subordinates. And the more we have allowed the Gospel to draw us into the process of learning faith, the more we ask ourselves why we wouldn't and why Jesus did.

John helps our reflection by describing Jesus' remarkable conversation with Simon Peter. Like us, Peter has felt that something is very wrong here, and his initial question is simple but fraught with a sense of impending conflict: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus tries to help Peter by recognizing that Peter (and the others) cannot make sense of what he is doing and by promising that he will understand later. We readers can realize that the "later" refers to Jesus' departure from this world, but Peter does not catch the meaning. He is adamant: "You will certainly not wash my feet forever." For a moment there is a breathtaking impasse. How could this come about? Peter has not shared John's description of Jesus' knowledge of his impending death and of his divine power that stimulated our sense of incongruity. But Peter's discomfort seems to arise from a related sense of impropriety.

Peter has been on the journey of faith in the Gospel. He trusts and follows Jesus wholeheartedly: "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (6.68-69). Jesus, the Holy One of God, is his Lord and he has no greater desire than to be a follower of Jesus. Indeed, as the end of chapter 13 shows, Peter desires to be a heroic follower of Jesus. He will follow Jesus anywhere, through any circumstances, even to death. But to be a heroic follower, he needs a heroic leader. Peter knows that Jesus is that great Lord, but what he sees before his eyes says nothing to his heart except "ignoble, menial, slave." He, like us, prefers a sovereign God, glorious in power, one to follow with absolute fealty. But when your Lord is about to make himself your servant, what do you do?

If they can understand no more than that he as their master is greater than they as his servants and messengers, that understanding is sufficient for them to act, to do these things and to receive the blessing of doing them.

John helps us to stand with Peter on that threshold between two worlds. With all good intentions, but with eyes formed for this world, Peter looks through the threshold into the world of Jesus and is aghast. John records Jesus' simple, gentle, but absolutely uncompromising response: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Unless I, your Lord, can be your servant, unless I, your God, can be your slave and die for you, you have no hope. For the moment, Peter can only grasp that he has misperceived the situation, that this washing must be something special. As a heroic disciple he wants more than anyone or anything else to follow Jesus. Jesus' response is one of almost condescending gentleness and reassurance. Real understanding, as Jesus promised, will come "later." Don't worry about elaborate washings, Jesus seems to say, you're already clean; just let me serve you.

As Jesus returns to his clothes and to the table, he begins the important task of helping his physical parable get inside the imaginations and hearts of his disciples, including us as we read. He begins from the idea of his greatness as Lord and Teacher whom they so prized. His exalted status means that they must let him define for them what is right to do. If he has washed their feet, they must follow his example. If they can understand no more than that he as their master is greater than they as his servants and messengers, that understanding is sufficient for them to act, to do these things and to receive the blessing of doing them.

But the evening has hardly begun. Jesus begins to speak enigmatically about fulfilling the scripture that says, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me" (13.18; Ps 41.9). By explicit references to Jesus' betrayal, John has guided us readers to know exactly of whom Jesus speaks. But he also helps us realize that Judas the betrayer was also the unmentioned other at the foot washing. No description is given of his reaction to Jesus washing his feet. We are left to surmise only that he might well have reacted much like Peter, but with the difference that to him Jesus' servile and contemptuous behavior only confirmed his worst

fears about Jesus' failure to be a true messiah. When Jesus acted so ignobly and slavishly, Judas desired no further washing but opened his heart and mind to the Accuser's temptation to betray Jesus.

John gives no emphasis to Judas' interior struggle and allows him not a word to say. The emphasis is on Jesus' knowledge and calm confidence in the face of the Accuser's threat and strategy to contravene Jesus' work. The attack of Satan is reduced to another exemplar of the way the one who has all things in his hands acts. For those who perceive, Jesus' response to this threat and fulfillment of scripture manifest his divinity—"that I am" (13.19, cf. 8.24, 28). That divine identity is shared with the world through Jesus' emissaries (13.20). Though Jesus washed Judas' feet, the betrayer ultimately had to depart. Every outward sign of Jesus toward Judas was that of acceptance and sorrow at his choice. There was no hint of force to forestall him or

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revealed in his action.**

punish him. His mission was kept hidden from the other disciples, except perhaps from the beloved disciple. When Judas went out into the night, he went out with well-washed feet and a morsel of bread from the hand of Jesus.

Against that symbolic night, Jesus begins to speak of glory. He pushes the disciples and us to see the things that have happened in a new way. He has instructed us as Lord and Teacher to imitate him and serve as he served. Peter was aghast at what Jesus was doing, but if Jesus as his Lord and Teacher insisted, he was ultimately willing to submit and imitate his Lord. But now Jesus wants that obedience and imitation to grow into a greater perception of reality, for us to see as he sees. As the door closes on Judas and the night, Jesus exclaims, "Just now the Son of Man was glorified and God was glorified in him" (13.31). (Some exegetes have seen 13.31 as the beginning of a new section, and tend to translate it as though it were looking to the future ["Now is the Son of Man glorified," RSV], but the combination of *nun* with aorist passive verbs makes a reference to the immediately preceding context much more natural.)

This emphatic statement resonates for us readers back to the beginning of the chapter and to Jesus' self-knowledge that set his actions into motion. He knew his own glory—coming from God and going to God—and his own unimaginable power with all things given into his hands. He knew the peculiar character of that immeasurable power and glory that is God's and that was his. He knew how utterly different the glory that flows from the self-giving love of God is from human perceptions of glory manifested in hierarchies of power and precedence.

When Jesus stripped off his garments and knelt with a water basin to tenderly wash his servants' feet, he was not doing something that contrasted or conflicted with his glory—a humiliation that he gritted his teeth to get through. He was precisely and clearly manifesting that glory. This is what the glory of God looks like when it comes into our distorted and jumbled world. The self-giving love of God that is at the heart of God and thus at the heart of all reality, that is the fire of creation and the gift of incarnation and the grace of redemption, that love that is the glory of God Jesus revealed in his action. But we, like Peter, are so often blinded by the darkness that we can hardly open our eyes to the light. Jesus challenges us to learn to see reality, to see the places where love is difficult but still persists, where hatred and contempt are easy but are overcome by forgiveness and grace, places that glow with the glory of God. Perhaps Jesus knew that he was never more exalted and glorious than when he knelt behind a hate-filled Judas and washed his feet. Jesus certainly knew that the manifestation of God's glory in this world turns the power and value structures of our world upside down. As long as we stand like Peter outside the threshold and with this world's eyes look in at the glory of God as Jesus knew it, it looks weak, servile, powerless, painful, full of arbitrary sacrifice. Jesus calls us to step through the threshold, enter that world of reality centered on God and his love, see

things as they are. Things that appeared weak and contemptible turn out to have eternal strength and delightful beauty.

But that day had more to come and Jesus knew it: "If God was glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once" (13.32). The glory that had just happened pointed directly to the great moment of glory that was only hours away. The cross of Jesus was to be that ultimate reality of the love of God shining into the darkness of the world. As Jesus expressed his profound love by becoming a slave to his servants and cleaning their dirty feet, so also in the horror, injustice, violence, cowardice and betrayal of the cross Jesus became the slave of every person, cleansing their sin as the Lamb of God, loving them to the end.

After announcing the Glory of God that had been manifested in self-giving service and which would be seen in the cross, Jesus bound that new vision to the life of ministry and community to which the disciples were called. In the shadow of the cross—"where I am going, you cannot come"—Jesus gives them a new commandment. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (13.34). The newness of this love is defined by Jesus' love. And that love is the glory and life of God shining in self-giving service and love to others, even to the extent of death on a cross. Jesus (and John) leave the manifold incarnations of such love to be explored by the disciples as their vision widens, their imitation of Jesus deepens, and their new perception of reality becomes more natural and everyday. The exploration of such love has no limit.

In the final section of this chapter, John brings us back to Jesus in conversation with Peter, still longing to be the superlative, heroic disciple, following his master to difficult places. Peter knows that he can follow because he is ready to do really hard things—even lay down his life—for Jesus. John's narrative seems almost to put a sad smile on the face of Jesus. He knows, as he will tell in chapter 21, that Peter will indeed lay down his life for Jesus, but not yet. He is on the way of faith, but still seeing even his discipleship through eyes trained by this world. Jesus sobers his enthusiasm by predicting Peter's denial, an event that seems to have become a major point of transformation for Peter. But immediately after such a dire prediction, Jesus continues, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me...." (14.1). We are all on journeys of faith marked by mountaintops and deep ravines. We are all learning step by step to trust God and to see the ways his glory and life are manifested in the world. This deepens our understanding of the profound ministry of Jesus and our confidence in the indomitable work of his love in our ministries today.

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